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## EVA SEVENIG

### SOCIAL MOBILITY IN BAAN HAD-NALENG: WHEN THE VALUATION OF COMMUNALITY ALLOWS FOR A DEMARCATION LINE IN A MULTI-ETHNIC VILLAGE IN NORTHWEST LAOS

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# SOCIAL MOBILITY IN BAAN HADNALENG: WHEN THE VALUATION OF COMMUNALITY ALLOWS FOR A DEMARCATION LINE IN A MULTI-ETHNIC VILLAGE IN NORTHWEST LAOS

**ABSTRACT** In this paper I focus on Baan Hadnaleng, a multi-ethnic village in northwest Laos which consists of two Mon-Khmer speaking groups, namely Khmu and Samtao. The village is unique in offering the possibility to trace processes of transcultural communication which are in other multi-ethnic villages in the region. Khmu, the more numerous and socially privileged group, are associated with Animism, while Samtao, the adapting and more disadvantaged group is associated with the religion of the state. Possibly partly due to this status-confusion Khmu and Samtao have established a communal social order in which they can benefit from impulses from each other and the outside, especially the state. I am thus concerned with three central, interwoven questions. Firstly, how are identities shaped in a multi-ethnic village, and which modes of transcultural communication are used? And what kind of structures do these strategies create? Secondly, what kinds of religious dynamics are to be seen? Thirdly, in which ways do processes like 'modernization', 'globalization' or 'mechanization' come into play and influence the structure of the multi-ethnic village?

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In Laos, the village—as in many parts of Southeast Asia—has to be seen as the most important social unit to study when one wants to learn something about the country. This is so because, due to their inaccessibility, villages in Laos remained self-sufficient and independent from state interference until very recently. Importantly, villages are the economic, ritual, political, and social units of identification for Lao peasants, who comprise around 80% of the population.[1]

Most groups do not build organizations above the village level, but most villages have a leader who mediates between the village and the state (see

[1] Laos consists of 49 officially recognised ethnic groups, one of which is the Lao (Steering Committee 2005). At first glance, this appears as if the ethnic group of the Lao - by

counting itself as one among all the other groups - posits itself on an equal foot. But in fact, every person in Laos should first and foremost be Lao, and only then can the name of the concerned ethnic group be added. For instance Khmu would then be called Lao-Khmu. Additionally, the label "Lao" has to be differentiated from the label "Laotian". The term "Laotian" was probably introduced by French colonizers and today connotes an encompassing category of all citizens of the Laotian nation-state. Thus, this term leaves no place at all for identities other than *the Laotians* (see Evans 1999, 2–6, 125). The terms are often not differentiated; however, I use "Lao" here and not "Laotian".

for instance Gunn 2003, 95, 150; Ireson 1996, 219; LeBar 1960, 73, 102; Lindeborg 2012, 22).



*Figure 1: Baan Hadnaleng*

I do not intend to depict Lao villages as closed-off creators of an essentialised culture in Laos. Rather, my aim is to show transcultural communication between groups at the village level. I look at how privileged groups communicate with less privileged groups, and what kind of structures this interaction produces. The best way to investigate communication between different groups on a village level would therefore be to study multi-ethnic villages. I focus on Baan Hadnaleng, a multi-ethnic village in northwest Laos. I argue that two groups with different histories of migration, different standings in the Lao state and different forms of practiced religion have established a communal social order in which both groups can benefit from impulses from each other and the outside, especially the state. The village is unique in offering the possibility to trace processes of transcultural communication which are not so obvious in other multi-ethnic villages in Luang Namtha. Baan Hadnaleng is also representative due to resettlement policies that reinforce migration movements. In general, multi-ethnic villages[2] have been on the increase in Laos, and especially in the north, since the 1990s (see Evrard and Goudineau 2004, Evrard 2007). Anthropology has traditionally been primarily concerned with mono-ethnic villages. For example, Carol and Randall Ireson state: "During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries […] [v]irtually all inhabitants of Laos lived in ethnically homogenous villages" (ibid. 1991, 923). Even if multi-ethnic villages were rather rare, these types of villages have not been part of the anthropological focus, and therefore may have largely escaped the anthropological gaze. Evrard, for instance, notes that in Luang Namtha in northwest Laos, multi-ethnic villages are "a very old trend" (ibid. 2007, 139) due to work migration and trade. Lao merchants in this region would marry Khmu or Lamet woman, and villages would gain a multi-ethnic touch, even when later transforming into mono-ethnic Lao villages (see, for instance, Evrard and

Goudineau 2004, 938–9; Petit 2012, 139–40). There are two papers dealing with Lao multi-ethnic villages as their main subject. Grant Evans (1999) looks at the emergence of a multi-ethnic village in Houaphan in northeast Laos, and Pierre Petit (2012) investigates religious pluralism in Bolikhamxay in central Laos. In order to grasp transcultural communication between the respective groups in Baan Hadnaleng and the processes that the village goes through, I refer to these studies while looking at my material through a particular theoretical framework. In a first step, I elaborate on this framework, then present basic ethnographical data, and subsequently provide analysis and comparison.

## 2. THE ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND DEFINITION OF TERMS

How can a 'multi-ethnic village' be defined and, more importantly, analysed? Multi-ethnic villages obviously consist of two or more ethnic groups, and thereby different religious, political, economic, and social systems. I go back as early as John Sydenham Furnivall and Richard Burton, who dealt with plural societies in order to grasp the nature of the processes in these social units. Both authors dealt with plural societies on the state-level, depicting how the forces of colonialism interacted with the 'indigenous people'. Furnivall (1980), who analysed societies in the Dutch East Indies (today's Indonesia) and in Burma, defines a plural society as "[…] a society, that is, comprising two or more elements or social orders which live side by side, yet without mingling, in one political unit" (1980, 86). He sketches a picture of a society that, unlike a homogenous and more stable society, hardly mixes. This is due to the fact that it consists of groups with differing social orders and histories, where developing a common will is difficult. The glue that might stick the groups together despite their inability to unite is, in Furnivall's eyes, the economy, and he thus concentrates on economic principles that order plural societies. In a similar vein, Richard Burton (1962) begins with the assumption that plural societies cannot be understood in cultural or ethnic categories. Rather, the key to understanding them are the "major political and economic structures of the whole society" (Burton 1969, 1235). Burton depicts a process of stratification that plural societies go through. This process creates classes that, by being structured more in economic terms, cross ethnic and cultural boundaries. The process does not necessarily lead to an abolition of the plurality of society under scrutiny, but the society becomes structured by class and no longer by ethnic dimensions like religion and language (Burton 1962, 1239 ff).

I am not asserting that by copying western lifestyle models that groups overcome ethnic differen-

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[2]  Such villages were also found in Thailand, for instance, by Hanks (1965).

tiation, thereby resulting in long-term result class stratification replacing former ethnic differences. Rather, I argue that in the process of transcultural communication in a plural society, the structure of a class-system may change. This class-system is neither introduced by western forces nor is it a rigid classification-scheme along capitalist lines. In Southeast Asia hierarchy is an inherent means of structuring society. This can best be seen when looking at the relations of *Tai* and *Kha*, who are spatially associated with the *müang* and *pa* (Lao ປ່າ[3]). *Tai* is used as a generic term, primarily Lowland dwellers (i.e. the Lao in Laos, the Thai in Thailand and the Shan in Burma etc.) who can linguistically be subsumed under the Tai language-familiy.[4] The *Tai* inhabit a "cultural space" stretching from "Assam in North East India eastwards to Guangdong Province of China, southwards to the northern parts of the Malay Peninsula and northwards through eastern Burma" (Turton 2000, 3). *Kha* on the other hand, which can be crudely translated as 'slave' (see page 9), are Non-Tai and often seen as subordinate to the *Tai*. In pre-modern times (Condominas goes back to the eighth century), the area that is called Southeast Asia today consisted of several interlocked *müang* (a realm with a capital as its core) which were respectively surrounded by a forest (*pa*). The *pa* was seen as the periphery when looking from the center. Condominas calls this *müang-pa* entity "systèmes à emboîtement", translated as "systems of boxes" (1990, 35). He describes three classes that interact: nobles (*Pìa Tao*), commoners (*Phrai*) and "slaves" (*Kha*). But between these positions intermediate possibilities of classification existed, the system was permeable, and crossing from one to the other class was possible. Center and periphery were linked by trade, ritual or by other means and *Kha* were valued as "the other" (Condominas 1990, 11, 46, 70; Sprenger 2007, 306; Turton 2000, 6, 12, 27, see also page 8). Nation-state building changed the nature of the relatedness between *müang* and *pa*, but a structuring of relations along these lines can still be seen. Guido Sprenger (2013) notes that this center-periphery model is not the only possible model which can be used in order to describe transcultural communication in Southeast Asia, though center-periphery relations are one of the most salient features of transcultural communication. Sprenger points out three possible models depicting relations of ethnic groups and the state in Southeast Asia: Center and Periphery, Contrast or Continuity, and Dominant and Subordinate forms. The center-periphery model necessarily includes values and therefore hierarchy. This hierar-

chy, however, does not necessarily have to do with power. Furthermore, the power hierarchy may also be reversible, when, for instance, a group depicts itself in cultural representations such as myths as superordinate to the state. His comparative model includes the examples of the Yao (a Miao-Yao-language speaking group) who migrated to Thailand and Laos across southern China, and the Rmeet (a Mon-Khmer-speaking group) of Laos. In model two (Contrast or Continuity) the center-periphery relations that are predominantly reproduced by the Yao are one of "continuity, replication, and mimesis", while Rmeet use "contrast, complementarity, and boundary maintenance". Rmeet demarcate themselves from the Lao state in a number of ways, these include identifying themselves as Highlanders and practising Animism. Yao, on the other hand, use certain Chinese cultural representations, like the Chinese script, thereby relying more on replication and mimesis. The third model (Dominant and Subordinate) comprises the possibility that, in addition to models one and two, mixed and subordinate forms exist (Sprenger 2013, 301 pp., 307 pp.).

I draw on parts of Sprengers comparative model by picking out three modes of communication that are telling for the interaction I analyse. These are demarcation, replication and complementarity. Demarcation means that a group may demarcate itself through ritual, cultural representations or through different means to other groups. Replication means that the concerned group replicates rituals or cultural representations of the other group. Complementarity means that the group neither demarcates itself from nor replicates the other group, but admits a common ground in some areas while still maintaining other areas of separation. These three modes of communication from which groups can choose and from which superordinate and subordinated forms evolve are the basis of my analytical framework. This in turn is based upon reversible center-periphery relations. My understanding of "class" is based on the concept of these reversible center-periphery relations. In Southeast Asia class and ethnic labelling exist side by side, and ethnic differentiations may include class-aspects. *Kha* and *Tai* can in this regard even be seen as ethnicised class categories (Turton 2000). Moerman (1968, 162, 163), for instance, shows how the class-system of the Lue in Northern Thailand was and is structured along ethnic lines. Lue avoid being classified along socio-economic class-lines based on wealth and lifestyle. They prefer ethnic labelling, because according to socio-economic class-lines they would be sorted on the lowest level, while when using ethnic criteria for distinction they can posit themselves above Yuan, i.e. Northern Thai. I use the term "class" in the sense of ascribed social status that is shaped by characteristics like ethnicity, gender and so on. People and groups can change their status is as I have shown above in relation to *Tai* and *Kha* and

[3]  For important terms I always give the Lao equivalent, unless otherwise stated. I mostly use the spelling prevailing in the academic literature, but as there is no standardised spelling system there may be aberrations.
[4]  For the problems that this term poses see also Turton 2000, 4.

it is derived by the maintenance of social relations and the capability of conducting certain rituals (see for instance Kirsch 1997).

Classes that emerge in multi-ethnic villages in Laos structure communication, in which, as will be shown, different kinds of strategies can be applied. This leads to the use of parts of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice (1977). Again, I am not arguing that class-struggle determines all areas of interaction, and that agents, like robots, act only according to schemes they were taught, without having the possibility to change the schemes which were instilled in them (see also Wimmer 2005, 33). However, the idea that people are born into a certain class and pursue adaptable strategies in order to gain a higher status is important in order to understand Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, which in turn is important for the analysis performed here. Importantly, part of Bourdieu's theory reconciles actors (the micro-level of analysis) and structure, the macro-level. Social structure is produced by habitus. Habitus can be described as the way people act, what they like, or how they are predisposed (see Bentley 1987, 28; Rehbein 2006, 193; Schwingel 1995, 60). Bourdieu describes it as: "a socially constituted system of cognitive and motivating structures" (1977, 76). He explains that: "The structures constitutive of a particular type of environment (e.g. the material conditions of existence characteristic of a class condition) produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively "regulated" and "regular" without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at end or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them and, being all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor" (Bourdieu 1977, 72, his emphasis). Thus, habitus structures actors' actions in a system of dispositions aimed at strategic positioning in the social field. Which group's ideas are super- or subordinated, and thereby how the common valorizations will look, is determined by the field of practice (see Dickhardt 2001, 24).

It is, as a last point, pivotally important to stress that in order to analyse the social structure of a village, this village is best to be seen as defined by the field of practice, and not by its geographic locations. Michael Dickhardt (2001) shows how space is created by social action and communication, and cannot be seen as only encompassing areas like villages, countries, towns, or fields. By seeing space from this angle the danger of falling back to a view that equals space with culture with group with village is averted. In this regard, Dickhardt notes how villagers at the same time essentialise their village-tradi-

tions and separate village and town, such as when they state that one only can understand their culture by understanding village life. At the same time culture is dynamic (i.e. ever changing), village and town are interrelated, and they cannot be analysed as two separate entities (ibid. 2001, 8, 99). A similar opposition applies when looking at the division of religion and politics. Religion and politics are best to be regarded as one system, but on some analytical levels a separation is needed in order to describe processes that are going on.

To summarize, I show how an un-unified but nevertheless intermingling plural society consisting of groups with differing histories and social organizations develop stratification, thereby achieving a common social structure and a form of temporary stability. However, my focus is not on the economic and political dimensions of transcultural communication, but on religious dynamics. In this instance the processes are a matter of oscillation. According to Edmund Leach's theory of oscillation, identities may oscillate between hierarchical (*gumsa*) and more egalitarian (*gumlao*) forms of social organization. By adopting Buddhism, for example, a Kachin could become a Shan (ibid. 1970 [1954], 8). Leach shows how ethnic groups cannot be easily demarcated.[5] Frederic Lehman (1967) and Michael Moerman (1965) elaborate on this by showing how ethnographic labels are often misleading, and groups often cannot be distinguished by dubious identity-markers like ethnonyms, language, dress, or other seemingly clear identity-markers. Fredrik Barth also stresses how tricky cultural labels can be: "[t]he critical focus of investigation […] becomes the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses" (Barth 1969, 15). In order to grasp transcultural communication, I refer to Barth's communication along demarcation lines. A group is constructed in a process of ascriptions by their own and other groups and the state, and in order to communicate, either differences or similarities with other groups or the state might be stressed (Barth 1969). In these processes of self-ascription, and ascriptions by others, group-identities may change—in fact they do, constantly. It is this process that brings to the fore dual identities that have confused researchers a great deal. This process might especially occur in multi-ethnic villages: dual identities or identities consisting of more than one ethnicity may be a sign of a transition towards a different social order. In Baan Hadnaleng, these fluid identifications may be seen as emblematic of the

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[5] Edmund Leach was accused of having adjusted data to theory, and thereby having described a social oscillation between Shan and Kachin that lacked empirical reality (Robinne and Sadan 2007, x, xi). Still, his model succeeded in being a milestone for subsequently anthropologists who accepted the challenge to overcome views of cultural systems that are carved in stone and never change, let alone communicate with other cultural systems.

state of transition the village is currently in. Baan Hadnaleng was originally built as a Samtao-village. Around 1977 Khmu began to migrate there. Today the village is turning from being a Samtao-Khmu village towards becoming more of a Khmu than a Samtao village, a form of transition which is also being communicated to the outside.

In essence, I am concerned with three central, interwoven questions. Firstly, how are identities shaped in a multi-ethnic village, and which modes of transcultural communication are used (demarcation, replication or complementarity)? And what kind of structures do these strategies create? Secondly, what kinds of religious dynamics are to be seen? Religious dynamics lie at the core of my findings; as ritual perpetuates, creates, and depicts the mentioned structures, and also because religious conversion is one of the main means in Baan Hadnaleng by which to articulate identity and move from one form of social organization to the other. Thirdly, in which ways do processes like 'modernization', 'globalization' or 'mechanization' come into play and influence the structure of the multi-ethnic village?

## 3. BAAN HADNALENG: A MULTI-ETHNIC VILLAGE

### 3.1. Basic ethnographical data

Baan Hadnaleng[6] is located in the province (*kweeng*, ແຂວງ) Luang Namtha and the canton (*müang*, ເມອງ) Nalae. Luang Namtha is the capital of the province of the same name, and is one of Laos' bigger towns[7], with guesthouses, an airport, and markets. In contrast, Nalae is much smaller. The two towns are connected by a gravel road next to which Baan Hadnaleng can be found.

In 2012, Baan Hadnaleng consisted of 93 households with around 500 inhabitants. The village lies only about 50 km from Luang Namtha, but it may take a whole day to get to there. In the rainy season, the road may not be accessible at all. Nevertheless, being peripheral to the bigger towns, Baan Hadnaleng is not to be understood as a remote and neatly demarcated area. This view is part of the discourse of townspeople when they talk about Baan Hadnaleng. Villagers' relationships with the outside can be superficially differentiated by 'class'. While higher-ranking people have marriage relations and a wide network of friends (which can be seen as a classificatory family-network, as those people are referred to as siblings) to Luang Namtha and

Nalae, people with a lower status have more relationships with other small villages, like Nonpaseth, a Khmu-village, which lies deeper in the forest, or to some of the surrounding smaller Khmu-villages. Besides marriage and friendship, the link between town and Baan Hadnaleng must also be seen in economic terms; Baan Hadnaleng lies at a height of 600 metres and people cultivate whatever they can, be it wet rice (*naa*, ນາ) or slash-and-burn (*hai*, ໄຮ) cultivation. The fields are to be found around 45 minutes' walk from the village, where they lie geographically dispersed. They are owned by family-units. Additionally, a variety of cash crops are grown, such as rubber, cardamom, or *Thysanolaena latifolia*, a grass species which is used for brushes. Farmers may sell those cash crops to the village chief (*nai baan*, ນາຍບ້ານ) and he and his deputies negotiate with the wholesalers. Baan Hadnaleng's (*baan*, ບ້ານ which means 'village' among other things) openness to connections to the other villages, be it by trade or other sorts of communication, might be grounded in the fact that it came into existence by migration processes of different groups. It consists mainly of two groups, Khmu[8] and Samtao.

Baan Hadnaleng is divided into two districts, Baan Hadnaleng Nüa, the northern part of the village (*nüa* meaning 'north, northern') is around ten to 15 minutes' walk from Baan Hadnaleng Tai, the southern part of the village. The village headman and the most important men of the village live in Baan Hadnaleng Nüa, where Khmu form the majority. In 2012, Baan Hadnaleng Nüa consisted of 60 households, 26 of which were Khmu, 14 were Samtao, one was Lue and 19 were multi-ethnic (mainly Khmu-Samtao).[9] However, these classifications may be somewhat arbitrary due to the highly contextual identity formation in Baan Hadnaleng, as someone who classifies himself as Khmu might be classified as Lao by others, and could genealogically be Samtao. In the next generation some of the Samtao and mixed households become Khmu households. According to the 2005 census, Khmu are the second largest ethnic group in the country after the Lao proper, comprising 613,893 people or 10.9% of the total population. Together with the Akha, the Khmu form the majority in Luang Namtha (Steering Committee for Census of Population Housing 2005; Badenoch 2013, 36; Evrard 2007, 129). On the way from Luang Namtha to Baan Hadnaleng all villages, with two exceptions, are Khmu.

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[6] I conducted fieldwork from June until August 2011, from November 2011 until July 2012 and from August until November 2012.

[7] According to Badenoch (2013, 35) the province Luang Namtha has 145,000 inhabitants.

[8] Khmu Subgroups in Baan Hanaleng are mainly Khmu-Kwaen, but there are also Khmu-Rok and Khmu-Lue living there. There were also a few Lao, Lue and one Black Tai living in the village when I was there, but fluctuation is high, as people move in and out due to marriage and work migration. Youth also leave to study or work in other parts of Laos. Concerning the difficulties of recording viable village-statistics see, for instance, Douglas Miles (2009, 23).

[9] Baan Hadnaleng Tai, with 33 households, is nearly 100% (despite one Lue and one Khmu Rok household) Samtao.

## 3.2. The histories of migration and social hierarchies

Not only do Khmu form the majority in Luang Namtha, they are also generally considered the original owners of the territory. Austroasiatic groups, to which Khmu belong, immigrated from China to today's Laos in the first century, long before the Tai-Kadai groups started immigrating around the eighth to thirteenth century. Tai-Kadai groups forced the Austroasiatic (including the Mon-Khmer branch) groups, also referred to as *Kha*, into the mountains. From the emergence of Lan Xang in the 14th century until the proclamation of the Lao People's Democratic Republic in 1975, rituals in which the respective king accepted the status of the *Kha-Khasak* (Khmu) as the original owner of the land and they in turn accepted his rule were conducted twice a year, and another ceremony was held every third year[10] (see Aijmer 1979, 739, 740; Archaimbault 1964, 57, 58; Evans 1998, 144-152; ibid. 1999, 2; Michaud 2006, xix; Petit 2013, 476; Pholsena 2006, 19, 22; Stuart Fox 1997, 1). Khmu in Southeast Asia can also be found in China (Sipsongpanna), Thailand and Vietnam (Petit 2013, 475; Proschan 1997, 92).

Samtao are one of the smallest ethnic groups in Laos. In 2005 there were 3,533 Samtao living in Laos, constituting 0.1% of the entire population (see Steering Committee for Census of Population Housing 2005). Samtao – due to war and hunger – migrated from Sipsongpanna many centuries ago.[11] Sipsongpanna today is an autonomous prefecture in Southwest China, and from 1180 until 1950, it was a kingdom of the Lue (Grabowsky 2012, xvii, xviii; Hsieh 1995, 303).[12] Samtao sometimes call themselves *Toumok* (the term could be translated as Highlander, it connotes 'the ones who live in the mountains, practice slash-and-burn-cultivation and are poor') (see also Evrard 2007, 147). The ethnonym hints to their past in Sipsongpanna as slash-and-burn-cultivating, spirit-believing small and dispersed groups. There are no indigenous sources like chronicles in which Samtao have been mentioned[13], but I suggest that they were included in the Kha or Bulang categories. As some Samtao-groups must have lived in near proximity to Lue, they adopted their form of Buddhism, presumably in order to become accepted into the Tai Lue society.[14] Samtao today are found in China (Sipsongpanna), Burma/Myanmar, Thailand and Laos, but are classified differently in the respective countries.[15] Under the current classification system in Laos, the population is codified into three groups, Lao Loum, Lao Theung and Lao Soung. These labels coincide with both language families and geographical positions. Lao Loum are the Tai-Kadai speaking, valley dwelling, and Buddhist state-forming group. Lao Theung populate the areas in between mountains and valleys and are Animist Mon-Khmer-speaker, and Lao Soung are Miao-Yao and Sino-Tibetan speaking Highlander who migrated to Laos most recently. Groups like Hmong or Akha are labelled Lao Soung, and have the lowest status in Lao society (Holt 2009, 207; Pholsena 2006, 47). Even if this kind of group marking is officially forbidden, as the state argues that it essentialises 'minority' groups, the classification system is widely used by both valley dwellers and highland people (Pholsena 2006, 47). In any case, Khmu and Samtao belong to the Mon Khmer-language branch and thereby both should be classified as Lao Theung. However, in Baan Hadnaleng only Khmu are considered Lao Theung, while Samtao are only partially encompassed by this category and tend to use Lao Lue as a means of self-classification. This is not surprising, as Khmu are intimately associated with the Austroasiatic groups (see also Badenoch 2103, 57), but Samtao are not. Khmu can be considered socially superordinate to Samtao in Baan Hadnaleng, which can be seen in the fact that the common language in the village is Khmu. Khmu and Samtao children learn Lao in school, but speak Khmu in the school breaks. Samtao speak Samtao among themselves, but even there their language is mixed with Khmu and Lao. Words designating inventions like 'motorbike' have no Samtao expression, and are betoken

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[10] The ritual was imbedded in the New Year festivities, which took place every year, but Archaimbault and Aijmer note that the ritual that reinforced the native status of the *Kha* and the power of the ruling king were only conducted every third year (Aijmer 1979, 740; Archaimbault 1964, 65).

[11] When they started to migrate exactly is not completely clear. Some informants stress that Samtao came to Laos in the first century, and thereby state that they, as Lao Theung, are original owners of Laos, like the Khmu. There must have been phases of migration-movements, especially in 1949, when the People's Republic of China was proclaimed (see Schliesinger 2003). So, there was no single Samtao migration movement, but many small Samtao groups, sometimes together with other groups (in the case of Samtao in Baan Hadnaleng Nüa, they fled with Lue) or even single households moving out for a variety of reasons and in different directions. The direction and manner of movement (and the circumstances) have to be judged case by case, and often cannot be accurately reconstructed.

[12] It gained its name in 1570 when it was divided into twelve parts, and hence was called *sipsong* (twelve) *panna* (districts) (Hsieh 1995, Grabowsky 2012).

[13] As the small numbers of Samtao - in comparison to the more numerous Khmu living in Laos - indicate, little literature regarding Samtao is available. Samtao are mentioned in comprehensive volumes about ethnic groups like those of Schliesinger (2003), LeBar (1960) or Chazée (1999). Debbie Lynn Paulsen (1989) concerned herself in her master thesis with the Samtao language and Samtao are mentioned by Evrard (2007), or Badenoch (2013). Unlike for the Khmu there are no detailed studies available.

[14] It probably was the leading elite who began to establish ties with poorer Lue—the funeral celebrations, at least, hint at this.

[15] In China they are classified as Bulang, and in Burma/ Myanmar as Tai Loi (Diffloth 1992, 35; LeBar 1960, 129; Schliesinger 2003, 204).

in either Lao or Khmu. I refer to this again later. On average day women, usually wear a *Sin* (the Lao-skirt) which was described as a Khmu-*Sin* to me.[16] Concerning the outside view on Baan Hadnaleng, Samtao are virtually non-existent on the public agenda in Luang Namtha. Few people know that a group called Samtao exists, while travel agencies offer trips to the Khmu village, Baan Hadnaleng. In Luang Namtha Samtao seem nearly invisible. In Baan Tha Oh, a village near Luang Namtha town, Schliesinger, in 2003, registered that Samtao were on their way to 'melt' with Khalom, a group originally known as Yuan (see Badenoch 2013, 49, 58), but who are often mentioned in one breath with Lue. In 2012, the old people that had spoken Samtao when Schliesinger was there were now dead, and the younger ones did not learn Samtao. In another province, Viang Phouka, where Samtao were said to live together with Lue, an old woman who was the only person in the village claiming to speak Samtao in fact spoke a mixture of Lao and Lue.

In this section, I have dealt with the positions of Khmu and Samtao respectively in the Lao-state, and how the village hierarchy in Baan Hadnaleng is structured. I now turn to the modes of communication, which comprise relations between Khmu, Lao, Samtao and Lue. These have to be seen on the state and village levels. I first look at how Samtao and Khmu respectively communicate with the state and then unravel how their modes of communication look like in Baan Hadnaleng.

### 3.3. The modes of communication

Samtao in general use replication as a superordinate mode of communication. They historically replicated Lue by converting to Buddhism and today they replicate the language, clothing, and ritual styles of the other groups in their villages in Luang Namtha. In Baan Hadnaleng Samtao speak Khmu during the day, with women often wearing wear a *Sin* that was depicted as Khmu to me, among other things.

Khmu, on the other hand, are extremely predominant in Luang Namtha. Nathan Badenoch (2013, 33) notes that there are even Tai villages that have turned Khmu. Still, not all Khmu in Luang Namtha stick to Khmu-identity-marker, like for instance being Animist. There are also Khmu who adopt Buddhism (see Damrong Thayanin 2006, 15; Suksavang 2003, 8).

In Baan Hadnaleng, lower status Khmu demarcate themselves from Samtao and Lao in that they are classified and classify themselves as Animist, and conduct the appropriate rituals. Khmu of higher status tend to use the subordinated mode of replication, copying Samtao and Lao by taking part in Buddhist rituals. Here a subordinated mode of communication of Samtao can be found: by being Buddhist they demarcate themselves from Khmu. This demarcation is to be seen as their subordinate mode of communication in Baan Hadnaleng. Baan Hadnaleng is the only village in Luang Namtha where Samtao speak their own language amongst themselves. In terms of ritual, after the Lao New Year (*Bun Phi Mai*) in April, a ceremony called *Soma Phɔ-Mɛ* ('tribute to father and mother') is celebrated, which was described to me as 'typical and purely' Samtao, in opposition to Khmu tradition (*Hidkong Papeini*, ຮີດຄອງປະເພນີ). On the day after the end of the Lao New Year festivities – which conclude with fireworks (*Bun Bang Fai*, ບຸນບັ້ງໄຟ) – the Samtao-village chief and his family walk from Samtao household to Samtao household and beg the elders for forgiveness for what they may have done wrong during the last year.[17]



*Figure 2: Soma Phɔ-Mɛ*

Indeed, the term *soma* is also used by Samtao and Lao in the sense of 'excuse me'. Recently immigrated family members need to wait one to two years until they can partake in this ritual, and so they sit aside as the ritual is conducted. Elders bless the young and free them from the burden of their bad deeds (*Bab*, ບາບ). The atmosphere is a mixture of the casual and the solemn. Reflecting this casual atmosphere, the television may be switched on in some households, but at the moment when the younger family members bow before the elders holding the *Phaa Khwan* - a tablet with red flowers, small yellow candles and rice - the atmosphere becomes solemn. The language used is—depending on who leads the ceremony—Samtao, Pali or Lao, but never Khmu. The ceremony (*Soma Phɔ-Mɛ*) is also performed by some Palaungic-speaking groups

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[16] Petit (2013, 75, 482) notes that this kind of *Sin* might stem from the Lue, which is not unlikely as the shop in Baan Hadnaleng selling this *Sin* is owned by Lue, and Khmu and Samtao have close connections to the Lue. But it may also be that the *Sin* stems from Khmu-Lue. Suksavang (2013, 13) reports on a Khmu-Lue tradition of weaving *Sin* in the Namtha area and Oudomsai; the *Sin* may thus be a blend of Khmu-Lue cultural representations, and today is manufactured in Baan Hadnaleng as a Khmu-*Sin*.

[17] I attended this ritual on 17.04.2012.

in Burma (Myanmar), as Milne reports, though it was carried out three times a year, mostly at dawn (1924, 199–200). Bouté describes how the Phunoy, a Tibeto-Burmese society in northern Laos, who like Samtao, converted to Lue-Theravada-Buddhism, pay tribute (*soma*) to the elders, the monks, and the dignitaries in exchange for their blessing during the New Year festivities (Bouté 2012, 99, 100, 110). In Baan Hadnaleng, this ceremony can be seen as a way Samtao demarcate from the Khmu by drawing on a Tai-Buddhist-ritual-idiom. Why do Samtao in Baan Hadnaleng demarcate themselves from the other group that they live with, whereas other Samtao in Luang Namtha province do not? Before I answer this question, I look at another multi-ethnic village and compare the processes to those I found in Baan Hadnaleng.

## 4. A DISTINCTIVE MULTI-ETHNIC VILLAGE-COMPOSITION AND HOW IS IT CREATED

In his study of Baan Sot in Houaphan (northeast Laos), where Mon Khmer-speaking Sing Moon live together with Tai-Kadai-speaking Black Tai, Grant Evans describes a process of "ethnic conversion" (Evans 1999, 126).[18] Similar to my findings concerning Samtao in northwest Laos, Sing Moon are about to give up many of their distinctive cultural features that distinguished them from the Tai-group. This process is reinforced by the fact that they feel embarrassed when talking about their identity. Evans (1999, 128, 129, 139) describes how Black Tai look down on Sing Moon and call them lazy. I did not find this with my informants: Khmu do not look down on Samtao. There are quarrels, and I perceived tensions in Baan Hadnaleng were much stronger than those in mono-ethnic villages. Nevertheless, these quarrels were never phrased along ethnic lines. Calling others lazy in Baan Hadnaleng occurred within families or among friends, but these had to do with the standing of that individual in question in the family or friendship-web, rather than with ethnicity. This may be explained by looking at the linguistic branches that the respective groups belong to: in Baan Sot, Black Tai belong to the Tai-Kadai-speaking groups. They are therefore more closely related to the state than the Mon-Khmer or the 'upwardly mobile' Sing Moon (Evans 1999, 127). Even if their languages are mutually incomprehensible, both groups in Baan Hadnaleng belong to the Mon-Khmer speaking linguistic group, and thereby fit within the same niche in the Lao state. The similarities between Samtao and Khmu concerning marriage systems - both have a patrilineal

system with preferred virilocal residence after marriage - also facilitate smooth communication. At the same time, the patrilinearity that links Samtao and Khmu demarcates them from Lao, who are reported to have a rather matrilinear kinship-system (see for instance Aijmer 1979, 746; LeBar 1960, 68).

While Evans (1999, 141) notes that Black Tai would not generally marry Sing Moon, as this would mean marrying downwards, it is not considered detrimental for Khmu to marry Samtao in Baan Hadnaleng. Rather, the status system outside of ethnic classification is the essential element in marriage decisions. Higher-ranking people, like the village headmen and his (Khmu) deputies, will be more likely to marry other high ranking individuals, whereas the lower-ranking people are likely to marry to someone who is also of lower rank. Evans describes the possibility of such interethnic marriages for Baan Sot, however, it was very seldom that a more affluent Sing Moon would marry a Black Tai, for instance (Evans 1999, 138, 140).

In Baan Sot, aside from language, the most relevant category that fosters ethnic tensions seems to be the mode of farming a group employs. While slash-and-burn and wet rice-cultivating techniques are combined according to Evans, the images tied to the respective group in connection to the mode of farming (Sing Moon are associated with the slash-and-burn-technique and Black Tai are seen as wet-rice cultivators) provide room for inter-ethnic conflicts nevertheless. In Baan Hadnaleng, the modes of cultivation are not divided along ethnic lines and therefore, the groups do not stigmatize one another along these lines. This again shows that while in Baan Sot the division between a Tai Kadai Lowland-associated group and a Mon-Khmer group exists, in Baan Hadnaleng two Mon-Khmer speaking groups have found common ground.

While Samtao and Khmu in Baan Hadnaleng belong to the same linguistic group and have enough similarities to enable smooth communication, at least in terms of ethnicity, it must be kept in mind that their niches in the Lao state differ in some respects. These have to do with the status system in combination with the respective histories of migration, and especially with the religious system. They also have to do with the strategies that Samtao and Khmu currently use to position themselves within Baan Hadnaleng and Lao society. Looking at these points more closely may also explain the mode of demarcation that Samtao are able to engage in Baan Hadnaleng. Like Baan Sot, Baan Hadnaleng came into existence through migration and resettlement processes. However, in Baan Sot the more socially disadvantaged group was forcibly settled with a group of higher status. This means that the status hierarchy is thus more or less clearly divided along ethnic lines, with the Black Tai Tai-Kadai speaking, Buddhist wet rice growers having high status, while the Sing Moon Animist Mon-Khmer speaking

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[18] Condominas (1990) labels this process as "Tai-ization", meaning "the adoption of a Tai material culture, Tai ritual and cosmology, and Tai language" (Evans 1999, 140).

slash-and-burn cultivators holding low status positions (Evans 1999, 127). In contrast, in Baan Hadnaleng this situation is somewhat more complex. Samtao, the socially more disadvantaged group are the original settlers, they still provide the village headman and they are those who are associated with being Buddhist, while Khmu—the group with socially higher status—practice (*son pao*, ຊຸນເຜົ່າ), Animism[19], the religion associated with the "ethnic minorities". By definition, Buddhism and Animism in Laos cannot be seen as two separate religious systems. Holt, for instance (2009), shows how intimately they are intertwined.[20] In particular, the Theravada-Buddhism Lue practice is intermingled thoroughly with spirits (see Bouté 2012, 99; Casas 2008, 291). In Baan Hadnaleng, the subordination of spirits under Buddhism can be seen in the temple, which has a shrine for *thewada* (ເທວາດາ, *Pali: devata*)[21], a home also for the spirits. In fact, pregnant woman are afraid of going to the temple as there are so many spirits there. The apparently clear separation of the two religious systems, even if repeated like a mantra, is also not strictly practiced. Samtao carry out rituals in which *Pachi* (*Lao Phi* [ຜີ]) – in this instance ancestors which have become spirits - play an important part. One example is the ritual *sɔng khɔ hüan* (literally "to send the 'bad' [spirit] away") in which the *Pachi* are chased away by a ritual specialist. The ritual specialist - who must be an experienced monk - recites a Buddhist formula to the *Pachi* who reside in a small clay-figure, thereby chasing them away. More significant than these observations is the fact that, as noted above, higher-status Khmu in the village also attend Buddhist ceremonies. Therefore, the "rule"[22] that Khmu are

Animist and Samtao are Buddhist is not strictly correct. In practice, Buddhist and Animist rituals are carried out side-by-side, with wealthier Khmu taking part in Buddhist rituals thereby replicating the Samtao religious system, which they themselves replicated from the Lue. Here, Bourdieus' theory of practice concerning habitus, which reconciles structure and acting actors, is useful. Khmu who came to the village brought Animism with them. This was their way of dealing with other Khmu, other ethnic groups and the state. Today, lower status Khmu families maintain these strategies and continue to practice these rituals. Richer Khmu, on the other hand, have to take part in Buddhist rituals if they want to play a political role in the Lao state, or even in Baan Hadnaleng.

Even if Samtao did bring Buddhism and even if the village headman is Samtao, they on the other hand still identify strongly with their *Toumok* (being poor highland people, practicing slash-and-burn cultivation) past. Nevertheless, by converting to Buddhism, Samtao acquired for themselves another identity marker quite separate from their *Toumok* ethnicity. In doing this, they had climbed the social ladder in Sipsongpanna, and internalized this new part of their identity, which became Habitus. This may be the most significant factor in Samtao's ability to communicate with Khmu by using the mode of demarcation in the village, and in other villages are not. In Baan Hadneng Khmu are intimately associated with being Animist, while the Samtao keep their separate identity alive mainly by being Buddhist. In other villages, where the other group also defines itself mainly by being Buddhist (in Baan Tha Oh the Khalom, in Viang Poukha the Lue etc.), the distinctive identity marker of Samtao falls away, and Samtao are more likely to give up their ethnonym and take on the ethnonym of the other group. In Baan Hadnaleng, higher status Khmu have started using Buddhism as a tool to get closer to the state and consolidate their status within the village. It would be interesting to restudy Baan Hadnaleng after several further generations, and investigate whether other Khmu may convert to Buddhism, leading to the potential disappearance of this distinctive Samtao identity marker.

There are different grades of integration, 'fusion' and assimilation in different villages at different times.

When looking at all these modes of replication and demarcation in Baan Hadnaleng, how can village unity be created and on the other hand the preservation of a demarcation line be warranted? When looking from a bird's eye view at Baan Hadnaleng, the overall prevailing mode of communication is complementarity. Samtao and Khmu in this instance have found a common ground where repli-

[19] See Robert Deliège for the argument that a socially disadvantaged caste in India tries to stress that social change is possible in recurrence to cosmological terminology, the myth of origin. However, I do not argue along these lines here (ibid. 1993, 546).

[20] Buddhism in Laos is often called *saasanaa phud* (ສາສະໜາພຸດ [one also may write it ສາດສະໜາພຸດ] literally religion-Buddhism). Animism is denoted as *saasanaa phi* (ສາສະໜາ, literally religion-spirit). There are other expressions for the two belief systems, but these are most striking as they connote a kind of equality between the two religious systems. As Holt notes, spirit belief in Laos is so deeply intertwined with Buddhism that superordination and subordination is highly dependent on context. In Thailand, on the contrary, Buddhism is seen as standing so much higher above Animism that it would be unthinkable to use *saasanaa* (religion) in order to depict spirit belief. *Khwam süa phii* (ຄວາມເຊື່ອ, the belief in spirits) would be used instead (Holt 2009, personal communication Kenneth Fleming 29.06.2013).

[21] Often translated as 'angels'. They are seen as messengers who bring the alms to the ancestors in Baan Hadnaleng (see also Holt 2009, 213).

[22] "Rule" in the sense of a prescribed classification-scheme which does not apply to practice. For example, even when guiding me to the temple in order to take part in a Buddhist ritual, a Khmu-informant stressed repeatedly and insistently that Khmu are always Animist and never Buddhist. He was so convincing that I consequently doubted that he was Khmu,

and did not notice that he was a Khmu going to a Buddhist ceremony.

cation and demarcation are 'encompassed' by communality. In this instance, Khmu let Samtao adapt and demarcate in some aspects, while in some aspects, Khmu lean towards Samtao slightly. For example, with an increasing number of cross-cultural households in Baan Hadnaleng, it has to be noted that at least some Khmu learn some Samtao vocabulary. Additionally, higher status-Khmu may ask the Samtao ritual specialist for help to ward off bad luck.

Before I deal with how village unity in Baan Hadnaleng is granted, and at the same time a demarcation line is maintained, I would like to summarise my findings regarding the relations between Khmu and Samtao in the village. They can be explained as follows:

| | |
|---|---|
| **Baan Hadnaleng** | -> prevailing mode of complementarity |
| Samtao to Khmu and Lao | -> superordinate mode of replication towards Khmu and Lao |
| | -> subordinate mode of demarcation towards Khmu |
| Khmu to Samtao and Lao | -> Higher status Khmu replicate Buddhism |
| | -> Lower status Khmu demarcate from Samtao and Lao |

*Illustration: Modes of communication in Baan Hadnaleng regarding the relations between Khmu and Samtao via the Lao.*

In Baan Hadnaleng, the mode of complementarity can be seen in that the two groups provide similarities while at the same time allowing for the expression of differences. The common kinship-system and new common rituals provide space for mutual understanding. In the following section, I turn to the use of the Lao system, which allows for further common ground between the groups while allowing them to maintain distinctive group-identities. A prime example of this is the use of Lao as a creole language. Used during the *Bun Greh* ritual, for instance, Lao is depicted as *pasat luam* (literally: language mix or creole).

## 5. THE VALORIZATION OF EXTERNAL RELATIONSHIPS AND COMMUNALITY

This section focuses on ideas that value the outside and those that value inner village-relations. As stated previously, most families living in multi-ethnic Baan Hadnaleng today stem from various mono-ethnic villages. Their families or ancestors were once anchored in a village setting which would have been analysable with Louis Dumont's (1980) concept of idea-values. That is, one could have identified some basic value-ideas and analysed the society along these lines. However, in the case of Baan Hadnaleng, several systems with several idea-values collide. It is therefore important to depict the common system of valorizations which structures communication both within the village, and with the outside, such as dealing with other villages and the state as a single village entity. In the village,

there are two core-valorizations: external relations, and community and mutuality ('communality'). In contrast to the findings of Tooker (2012) among the Akha in northern Thailand, who demarcate themselves as thoroughly as possible from the outside, the outside is highly valued in Baan Hadnaleng. In the village, having connections to the state confers status. At the same time, the valorization of communality for the village inhabitants grants the possibility to form a communal social order without giving up one's own group identity. In order to maintain this kind of village solidarity certain rituals are carried out frequently. The most common ritual is the *Suu Khwan* (Samtao: *Drrkti*, Khmu: *Téng Hmmaal*) (see also Petit 2013, 480). Virtually every month, those who can afford it arrange a *Suu Khwan*. *Suu Khwan* can be situated between Buddhism and Animism, with elements borrowed from both religious systems depending on the group conducting it. It is practised among Highlanders and Lowlanders in Southeast Asia as a healing, welcoming, leave-taking, marriage, and birth ritual. In short, it is a ritual that is conducted in transitory situations. Behind the *Suu Khwan* stands the belief that the body consists of several *khwan* (simplified translatable as 'soul'), which need to stay tied to the body. Should it happen that *khwan* flees (for example when someone is frightened or in other dangerous situations) it must be called back by conducting a *Suu Khwan* ritual. During the ritual it is tied to the body, in that everyone who is present ties a band around the wrist of the person for whom the *Suu Khwan* is conducted (see for instance Condominas 1970; Kirsch 1997; Platenkamp 2010; Postert 2003; Tambiah 1970). As a ritual conducted by both Lowland and Highland people, *Suu Khwan* is a kind of lingua franca. No other ritual is conducted as frequently in Baan Hadnaleng, demonstrating the importance of communality in the village. Being neither a Khmu nor a Samtao ritual, *Suu Khwan* perpetuates and depicts that class in Baan Hadnaleng transcends ethnicity. *Suu Khwan* can be seen as a feasting ritual in Kirsch's (1997) sense. To host a ceremony requires both material wealth and the necessary social relations, thereby making visible and stabilizing the status of the concerned household within the village. This will become somewhat clearer when I explain the other prominent ritual performed in Baan Hadnaleng, the *Bun Greh*. Many villagers see *Bun Greh* as the most important festivity. Pierre Petit (2013, 472; ibid. 2012, 141) observed *Bun Greh* in the multi-ethnic Hmong, Lao and Khmu village Thongnamy (Bolikhamxay, central Laos). He states that *Bun Greh*, a national festival, 'was given' to the Khmu by the state because the Khmu wanted to be more involved. Petit describes *Bun Greh* as an invented tradition - after Hobsbawm (1984) - which dates back to the 1990s. It was designed after a Khmu ritual called *Greh*, but has little in common with this small family ritual. *Greh* is held to celebrate the end of the

harvest and the Khmu-New Year. When conducted privately by Khmu, *Greh* involves a communal meal, before blood is smeared on family members' knees (ibid. 2013, 475, 477, 480; see also Suksavang 2003, 47ff.).



*Figure 3: Suu Khwan and Bun Greh*

Interestingly, *Bun Greh* is sometimes seen as artificial in Thongnammy, and Petit notes that it is not conducted every year and not in every village. This is reportedly due to financial reasons, making its popularity rather limited (Petit 2013, 476, 485, 488). The question then is why people in Baan Hadnaleng see it as their most important festivity. In Baan Hadnaleng, *Bun Greh* is celebrated over about nine days.[23] However, not everyone sees it as a pure Khmu festivity, with some Samtao assuring me that it also was a Samtao festivity. Confronted with opposing claims, they would laugh and say: "*meen bun luam*" ('it is a communal festivity'); making it a festival of both groups, thereby connoting community in the village. The mixture of communality and demarcation can best be seen on the third day and the last day of *Bun Greh*. On the third day, Khmu identity is stressed, with women performing Khmu dances while a man performs a Khmu sword dance. The shows do not take place in the middle but rather at a place from which one can leave the village, making the whole festivity seem to be connected to articulating Baan Hadnaleng identity to the outside. People from Luang Namtha, Nalae (and in 2012 even from Europe) are invited to stay in the village as guests. At no point is the village closed. Other Mon-Khmer speaking groups close their village for certain rituals. Andrew Turton for instance reports that villages were closed for certain festivals in Northern Thailand (1972, 227). In Laos Nonpaseth, a Khmu-village with which Baan Hadnaleng is connected, is reportedly closed for spirit-rituals after harvest. In the same vein, Mon-Khmer speaking Rmeet build village gates to ward off strangers

when conducting annual rituals for the village spirit (Sprenger 2008, 81; ibid. 2009, 940). Before 1975, lowland villages in Lao were marked with a *taleo* (a star-shaped sign made of bamboo) as a sign for anybody who came near that they were not allowed to enter the village while the village spirit was being "fed", that is, got his biannual sacrifices (Condominas 1970, 17).

Conversely, when celebrating *Bun Greh* in Baan Hadnaleng, no animal blood is shed at any time. However, a pumpkin for example is laid beneath the ritual post to serve as a reminder of the Khmu as the original owners of Laos. A *Suu Khwan* also takes place, where the most important men of the village are given the most strings. The strings depict and propagate the village hierarchy, with local villagers showing respect to the most important men - politically, socially, and religiously - who may be Samtao or Khmu, ethnicity plays no role. The significant point is that the village hierarchy is depicted and perpetuated here, and that this hierarchy is not linked to ethnicity. The modes of communication outlined here serve to produce a common social structure in contemporary Baan Hadnaleng that is ordered along lines of class that transcend the criteria of ethnic division, a process that Burton demonstrated to happen frequently in plural societies (see page 2). As stressed previously, this does not mean that the plurality of the society in question disappears.

The festivity concludes with *Lamvong*-dancing (a Lao dance) and Khene-playing (a Lao instrument in the form of a small kind of pan flute), with celebrations going late into the night (see Petit 2013, 478). The festivities are thus closed in Lao-style. The last few days are reserved for festivities in the temple[24], and Samtao men and women as well as high-status Khmu show respect to the ancestors and listen to monks chanting. During the final days, Samtao identity is articulated by Buddhist ceremonies. What is striking here is how much this festival shows the complementarity of Khmu and Samtao living together in Baan Hadnaleng. A festival usually seen as Lao Theung or Khmu is, on the one hand, used to stress the unity of the village as a whole, while on the other it is used by Khmu and Samtao to stress their distinctive identities. In the village both groups maintain attributes of their systems by valuing external relations and communality. In this context communality is valued higher than external relations are. People from the outside are invited as guests and therewith subordinated, Lao ritual elements conclude the feasting, but the main ritual activities are Khmu and Samtao.[25] The in-

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[23] I attended Bun Greh in Baan Hadnaleng, which went from the 1 January 2012 until 9 January 2012.

[24] The village temple is situated in Baan Hadnaleng Tai, and is built at a place higher than both of the village districts.

[25] The valuation of Baan Hadnaleng in regard to its position at the periphery of the state—the forest—can also be seen by the fact that food which is eaten in Baan Hadnaleng (*ahan thammasat*, ອາຫານທຳມະຊາດ, literally food nature) is of-

habitants of Baan Hadnaleng use Lao concepts, not only in order to connect with the state, but also to bridge differences among themselves. At the same time, these concepts hold them back from "melting together". Using some Lao ritual elements, such as the *Soma* ceremony, and calling them their own allows Samtao to use cultural representations to demarcate themselves from Khmu. Simultaneously, a trend toward the unmarking of cultural representations and rituals can be observed, with the headman of the village and his deputy, amongst others, saying that the first day was the most important. On this day nothing happens except a communal meal and drinking between the village headman, his deputy, and their respective families and friends.[26] I also asked Samtao and Khmu in Baan Hadnaleng what 'ritual' is for them. They would usually answer 'eating and drinking together'. Samtao, in particular, would stress that 'eating and drinking together' are Samtao rituals. May one say, then, that ritual has lost significance in Baan Hadnaleng? Can one argue that due to secularization, modernization, globalization and mechanization processes a village that wants to be incorporated into the growing nation-state, a village that highly values external relations, loses its culture and stresses more economic needs and the drinking of alcohol? This line of argumentation would be in accordance with what Furnivall ascribes to plural societies (see page 2). Initially, it appears like he could be right. Perhaps the most important ritual in Baan Hadnaleng is indeed a state-ritual, and those rituals generally seen by locals as most important are 'eating rice and drinking alcohol together'. Thus, instead of an elaborated ritual formula in a special language, with special ritual paraphernalia, and a solemn atmosphere, the simple act of sharing food and alcohol is defined as ritual (*piti*, ພິທີ). In this regard it is important to stress that 'drinking alcohol together' lies at the core of indigenous Khmu rituals. "Drinking rice wine from the same jar can be considered an important symbolic mechanism for the reproduction of "Khmu Khwaenness"" (Schopohl 2011, 263; see also Suksavang 2003, 38 f., 41, 58). Occasions of 'eating and drinking together' are also depicted as indigenous Samtao-rituals by Samtao. Furthermore, 'eating rice and drinking alcohol together' demonstrates status (see Evans 1990, 130). When, for instance,

households in the village drink beer, it is a sign of wealth, but when only the ordinary liquor (Lao Lao) is served, it is a sign that the household is less affluent. As argued above, by transcending ethnicity, the status system holds Baan Hadnaleng together as a multi-ethnic village. 'Eating and drinking together' thus shows how two Mon-Khmer speaking groups with different histories of migration have found a mechanism to form a communal social order in which both groups can keep niches for their own identity as well as benefiting from impulses from the outside, especially the state. Both groups stress the importance of communal feasts which may in the past have been seen as a core of Khmu-ritual, but in the process of transcultural communication was replicated by Samtao. Or, seen from another angle, a ritual that is rather unmarked is used as a lingua franca in a new and emerging Baan Hadnaleng ritual system.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

I started by posing the question of how to analyse transcultural communication in multi-ethnic villages, and the processes that those villages go through in northwest Laos. In order to find an answer I borrowed Furnivall's and Burton's concepts of plural societies because both stress that such societies cannot be understood by looking at cultural and ethnic terms alone. These theories are useful as, in Baan Hadnaleng ethnic labels are difficult to apply. These processes are best looked at in reference to Leach (1970), Moerman, (1965) Lehman (1967) and others. Due to intermarriage in Baan Hadnaleng, dual or intermediate identities exist. Some people in the village are able to switch from one identification to another without any difficulty. For instance, a man whose father is Samtao deals so much with the state that he is seen as Khmu or even Lao. In different situations, he is able to call on or emphasize the ethnic identity most relevant and advantageous to the situation. The village in an equal vein is in transition from being Samtao, to both Samtao and Khmu, towards eventually being more of a Khmu than Samtao village. Currently the communal social order leaves place for a complementarity of both groups, which can be traced back to the histories of migration, the religious systems and the positions of Khmu and Samtao in the state. Khmu, the more numerous and socially privileged group, are associated with Animism, while Samtao, the adapting and more disadvantaged group is associated with the religion of the state. This status-confusion might have helped that ethnic means of structuring the society of Baan Hadnaleng being transcended and that a differently structured status-system aroused, while the demarcation of the two groups was possible. Multi-ethnic villages may go through

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ten more highly valued than food from Luang Namtha. Only *ahaan thammasat* satiates and gives energy for work. But in other contexts the food in the big towns is described as being tastier. See Sarinda Singh (2010), who states that in urban centres of Laos, wealthier people are currently increasingly eating forest food. This consumption pattern of eating "wild-life" shows how a certain Lao identity is constructed by valuing the forest (pa, ປ່າ) and the relations that it connotes (ibid. 2010, 326).

[26] Eating and drinking together takes place outside the village. Afterwards, there is a party in the deputy's house with more eating and drinking. People from outside also visit on this day.

such processes when different social orders collide and a common social order and structure has to be found. Two rituals depict the communal social order of Baan Hadnaleng: *Bun Greh* and *Suu Khwan*. Both rituals hint at a high valorization of external relations and communality, of which communality appears the most important. The village is connected to the state and highly valorizes relations with the state, but communication is practised according to the rules Baan Hadnaleng follows, the village is not 'a victim' of modernization processes. I not intend to say that Baan Hadnaleng is cut off from state influences, and—as one may have it—modernization processes. Moreover, it is my attempt to show how input from the outside is processed according to Baan Hadnaleng 'rules'. Villagers take from the outside what suits them and reject what does not fit. Rituals in the village tend to become ethnically unmarked in order to stress community, which could be seen in the fact that 'ritual' was very often defined to me as 'eating and drinking together'. The ceremony itself, if one exists, is devalued. This high valorization of communality holds Baan Hadnaleng together, while allowing space for demarcation. Samtao use replicating strategies such as imitating the dress, ritual, and language of the other group as a superordinate mode of communication. While in the other villages I visited in Luang Namtha, Samtao appear to have given up or to be in the process of giving up their ethnonym, in Baan Hadnaleng they use demarcation strategies such as *Soma Phɔ-Mɛ* as a subordinated mode of communication. I have focused on how Samtao in Baan Hadnaleng – in contrast to other villages - have communicated demarcation and thereby maintained parts of their Samtao identity. I found the identity marker that Samtao use in general to be part of the reason. Great parts of the Samtao identity depict them as a disadvantaged group, as poor Highland dwellers (*Toumok*), which in a similar vein led the Sing Moon, according to Evans, to assimilate with another group. However, Samtao may also use Buddhism as their identity marker, and when they live together with a non-Buddhist group, they maintain parts of their own identity. Baan Hadnaleng is unique in that two systems collide and 'fuse' into one system, comprised of variations of the two. As a composition of two groups, the village will likely keep niches in which both groups communicate while keeping their distinctive identity-markers. It will be interesting to see what will happen if and when some higher-status Khmu convert to Buddhism and become Baan Hadnaleng's leading elite. Finally, I hope that further research in multi-ethnic villages is undertaken so that these dynamic processes can be more comprehensively evaluated and compared.

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